

## **Great Start Community Conversation Guidelines: Shared Purpose**

### Introduction

Throughout Michigan, communities recently held conversations about a vision for young children and their families. Joining the Great Start initiative, many communities are building commitments to a “picture of the future” that is meaningful and inspiring, uniting diverse perspectives to build a brighter future for Michigan’s youngest citizens.

The following themes emerged from the community conversations:

*Children must be Michigan’s number one priority and resource for the future.*

*We must give parents the tools they need to be their child’s first and most important teachers.*

*To give children early learning opportunities, the basic needs of Michigan families must be met.*

*Communities welcome, value, and act on behalf of children and their families.*

Many communities are working to blend diverse community perspectives together regarding the shared purpose of a comprehensive early childhood system. Through groups such as the multipurpose collaborative bodies (MPCB), collaborative planning is already successfully underway in many communities. Over 60 percent of the MPCBs have committees that focus on early childhood. These communities realize that shared purpose is an essential foundation for a collaborative local approach to a comprehensive early childhood system.

The Early Childhood Core Team developed “Community Conversation Guidelines: Shared Purpose,” a tool for community dialogue. Holding a Great Start Community Conversation about shared purpose provides an opportunity for community members to discuss, from many different

perspectives, what the purpose of a comprehensive early childhood system. The Great Start Strategic Action and Planning Project will use the information shared by those hosting community conversations to complete another step in the “Blueprint for Action,” Michigan’s strategic plan for a comprehensive early childhood system.

### **What is a community conversation?**

A community conversation brings together a diverse group of people who have a passionate interest in children from birth to age five and their families, to engage in dialogue about the future they want for all young children and their families. The people who participate in a community conversation may all live in the same community or may be a community of people who work together at the state or local level on behalf of young children and their families.

Participants share what they think and feel, and listen to what others think and feel. Differences of opinion are respected. The goal of the conversation is not to reconcile the differences but to accept and acknowledge them, looking for areas of common ground.

### **What will my community gain from holding a community conversation?**

The experience will help your community:

- Cultivate the conditions for change in your community
- Discover common hopes and concerns
- Realize the potential that exists for shared action
- Rediscover a sense of unity with other members of your community
- Create collective wisdom about what “works”

### **What is the purpose of the community conversation?**

The information created during the conversation will be used to help inform the creation of a shared purpose for Michigan’s comprehensive early childhood system – known as Great Start. The information gained from the conversation can also be useful to communities as they work to create their local early childhood system.

### **Where can community conversations occur?**

- In schools or homes
- At community centers or libraries
- In places of worship

- At meetings of existing partnerships, multipurpose collaborative bodies or specialized early childhood committees
- In board rooms
- At government buildings
- Any place where participants will feel welcomed!

### **Who should be invited to the Community Conversation?**

A group of 15 to 20 people who have a passionate interest in children from birth to age five and their families. Each group ought to include:

- Parents of children up to the age of eight, who are specifically present to share their perspectives as parents of young children who have participated in early childhood services and supports
- Members of the broader community who don't specifically work only on behalf of young children but who believe that early childhood is a critical developmental period (examples include: local police department members, juvenile court judges, business leaders, corporate executives, parks and recreation employees).
- Individuals who are paid as to work with children and their families from birth to age five (examples include: preschool teachers, childcare providers, or pediatric health care providers).
- Public and private sector organization directors/administrators, program supervisors, and other leaders of public and private enterprise

We highly encourage you to invite participants who have diverse views, as well as participants who represent diverse groups within your community. These individuals are likely to be people who affect each other's lives but rarely or never meet. Interestingly enough, most are likely to discover common ground when they do meet and have an opportunity to listen and learn from each other.

We suggest a smaller sized group because it will allow more time for members to share their ideas, thoughts, and concerns. If it turns out that there are more people interested than the recommended limit of 20, you should solicit another convener and hold additional gatherings.

### **How long will the conversation take?**

The time frames provided are by necessity approximate. The estimates represent the minimum amount of time it will likely take to complete the

questions. It is our belief that the questions are not likely to be thoughtfully considered if *less* time is selected.

1. Welcome the group and make introductions – 10 to 15 minutes
2. Discuss assumptions and process for questions – 10 to 15 minutes
3. Complete question process for each of the three community conversation questions
  - Share the question – 1 minute
  - Answer clarifying questions – 3 minutes
  - Individually think and write – 5 to 7 minutes
  - Share individual responses in round robin – 2 minutes/participant
  - Clarify questions – 5 minutes
  - Group similar responses – 10 minutes
4. Thank the group for attending and contributing – 5 minutes

## **How-to List for Community Conversations**

### Before the conversation

- Bring together a conversation planning team to set the location, date, and time for the conversation.
- Identify whom you want to invite to the community conversation. Generally about one-third of the people you invite will be unable to attend, so you can “over invite” by that amount. Each group ought to include:
  - Parents of children up to the age of eight
  - Members of the broader community who don’t specifically work only on behalf of young children but who believe that early childhood is a critical developmental period, for example, the sheriff, county commissioners, the juvenile court judge, corporate and/or small business persons, the editor of the local paper, etc.
  - Individuals who are paid to work with children from birth to age five and their families, for example preschool teachers, child care providers, and pediatric health care providers, etc.

- Public and private sector directors/administrators, program supervisors, and other leaders of public or private enterprise
- Mail, e-mail or phone the community conversation invitations to your potential participants. Make sure the invitation includes whom to RSVP to and by when.
- Find a person who is willing to serve as the convener for the conversation (you will need more than one convener if more than 20 people accept). This person will **not contribute** to the conversation itself but will help all the participants to feel included and listened to. The convener will also be responsible for facilitating the conversation by helping the group to stay on topic and hold to its time frames for the conversation. The convener will work with the recorder to transcribe the large flip chart pages onto the **Conversation Record** handout.
- Find a person who is willing to act as recorder and make a public record of the conversation on flip chart paper. The recorder also will not contribute to the conversation but will focus on writing down what is said by each participant. It is important to choose someone with legible printing.
- Gather the materials for the conversation—blue or black markers for the recorder, flip charts and tape for attaching flip chart pages to the wall, enough pens for each participant to have one, and four 8 ½ x 11 sheets of paper for each participant.
- Copy the handouts from the packet and prepare the flip charts for the meeting. One flip chart will list the **Conversation Assumptions** and the other will list the **Conversation Questions**. (Write the portion of the **Conversation Assumptions** that is in *italics* on the flip chart. You will use the portion in parentheses to help explain the assumption if there are questions.)
- Make setup arrangements, including nametags, sign-in sheet copies, and room setup. Arranging chairs in a circle or in a circle around the table will help to make sure that each participant can see and hear the others.

- Ask 2–3 people to serve as greeters when participants arrive. They will welcome participants and help them to find a seat. Establishing a welcoming environment from the beginning is important in order for participants to feel comfortable and included.
- If possible, follow up with all those who were invited but did not RSVP.

### During the Conversation

- Set up a welcome table for nametags, sign-in sheets, and handouts. Post the flip charts on the walls so that they will be visible to all participants.
- The designated greeters welcome each person as they arrive. Greeters help participants to sign in, make a nametag, complete the sign-in sheet, and find a seat.
- Introduce the convener and recorder. Convener explains that he or she will help the group stay on topic and stick to time frames but will not share personal opinions. Convener explains that he/she will stay neutral at all times and help the group to follow the **Conversation Assumptions**.
- Convener explains that the recorder will make a public written record of the conversation on the flip chart paper and will likely need to ask for input or clarification to make sure the main points are recorded. Convener explains that the written flip charts will be transcribed and sent to the Great Start Strategic Action and Planning project.
- The convener asks all participants to share their name and explain *briefly* why they chose to attend.
- Convener invites the group to review the **Conversation Assumptions** and explains that each participant needs to keep the assumptions in mind throughout the conversation and that one of convener's jobs is to remind participants of the assumptions, if necessary.

### Conversation Assumptions

- ***We will acknowledge one another as equals in the conversation.*** (Our equality comes from our being human.)
- ***We will try to stay open to the perspectives of others.*** (We will remind ourselves that everyone has something to teach us.)
- ***We recognize that we need each other's help to become better listeners.*** (We will listen as best we can, and invite others to help us listen better.)
- ***We will not criticize the ideas of another, but will offer our own ideas that might be different.*** (In a dialogue process we do not want to criticize or judge what others might think, but instead take an opportunity to offer our own perspective.)
- ***We will slow down so we have time to think and reflect.*** (We will use a round robin approach so that each person has the opportunity to speak thoughtfully.)
- ***We will remember conversation is a way to think together and we expect it to be messy at times.*** (The ideas that the group shares will be diverse and likely won't connect, especially at the beginning. This can be frustrating to some members. But if we suppress the messiness at the beginning, it will surface later and likely be disruptive.)

- Convener asks if there are any questions about the assumptions and answers any that are asked.
- Convener explains how the conversation will work.
  - a. Tell the group that there are three questions. Point out the written questions on the flip chart. Explain that Michigan needs a clear, concise statement of what a comprehensive early childhood system should do and for whom. Explain that their ideas in response to the questions will help to shape that statement for Michigan.
  - b. The convener passes out the two handouts, "The Blueprint for Michigan's Comprehensive Early Childhood System" and the "Critical Components of a Comprehensive Early Childhood System." Review the handouts with the participants so that they understand that (1) the system needs to include at least these five critical components; (2) the conversation that is taking place today relates to Core Question #2 on the blueprint.

- c. Explain that the group will take 5–7 minutes to think and write about each question. Explain that you will provide paper and pens to each participant, if needed.
  - d. Explain that a round robin approach will be used with the group, so that all participants can share their perspective without interruption. Explain that each person can share his or her perspective or pass when it is his or her turn. During a person's turn, the group listens respectfully but does not interrupt to ask questions or share a point of view that might be different.
  - e. Explain that only questions of **clarity** can be asked. Explain that it is your job to hold the group members to the commitment to ask questions to **clarify** the input of others. Explain that there is no need to come to consensus today and that the information that is generated in conversations around the state will be used to identify key elements of the Purpose/Mission.
  - f. Explain that at the end of each question's round robin, the group will organize similar ideas in groups.
- The convener helps the group to work through c–f (above) with each question, using the following time frames:
    - Read the question to the group – 1 minute
    - Ask if there is a need to clarify the question and do so – 3 minutes
    - Each participant individually thinks and writes his or her response to the question (without speaking) – 5 to 7 minutes
    - Use round robin for all participants to share their response – 2 minutes/participant
    - Clarifying questions by group members for another group member's response – 5 minutes
    - Ask participants to help you group similar responses – 10 minutes
  - Remember to follow the round robin approach to ensure that each person has a chance to speak. After each person in the group has spoken or passed, the convener can open up discussion for anyone to contribute an additional idea but not for criticizing the ideas shared by another participant.



- Remember that it is your job as the convener to hold the group to the **Conversation Assumptions** and to allow questions only for clarity. Pay attention to the time frames for each question and move the group to closure for each question within the time frames. Respect the group's need for the conversation to start **and** end on time.
- The recorder records the information shared by the participants on flip chart paper. The recorder uses the words of the participants and writes large enough that everyone can see. If the recorder is not sure what has been said, he or she should clarify with the person who shared the remark.
- At the conclusion of the questions, the convener thanks the participants for attending and reminds them that the information gained from the conversation will be used in the strategic action plan that is being developed for Michigan's early childhood system of care and education.

#### After the Conversation

- The convener and recorder complete the **Conversation Record** form included in these materials. This form can be submitted via e-mail to Joan Blough at [jblough@net-link.net](mailto:jblough@net-link.net). **All community conversation records must be received by December 5, 2003.**

#### **The Community Conversation Questions**

1. What should a comprehensive early childhood system do for children from birth to age five and their families?
2. Who are the children and families that should be supported and served by a comprehensive early childhood system?
3. How will our community work with parents to design our local system? Who else needs to be a part of the collaborative effort and how will our community include all who want to participate?

**Whom should we call if we have questions about holding a  
Community Conversation?**

Please contact Joan Blough, Great Start Strategic Planning Coordinator, at  
(269) 345-5968 or [jblough@net-link.net](mailto:jblough@net-link.net).